

NOISE FROM UNDERGROUND

Post-Punk Music, Culture, and Politics

The music of Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Soundgarden, Sonic Youth, Stone Temple Pilots, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Pearl Jam, Green Day, and their ilk have enjoyed a remarkably long half-life, and indeed, in one form or another, many of these bands are still active. Too diverse to encapsulate under any banner other than “post-punk,” with roots in the 1980s and early 1990s, their musical expressions are now enshrined in classic rock radio formats and iPod playlists across the country and internationally. Their creations continue to exert gravitational pull on legions of aspiring young bands and band wannabes. Indeed, post-punk—which catapulted to widespread public attention with the 1991 release of Nirvana’s *Nevermind*—transformed and continues to influence mainstream music. Not all of these developments have led to improved music. A veteran of the Boston underground music scene of the 1980s and 1990s satirized contemporary punk pop’s slickly produced and formulaic sound—epitomized by Blink-182 and its imitators—quipping, “It just sounds like you put the money in the gumball machine, turn the crank, and out comes punk.” But on the whole, post-punk has wrought a greater concern with the authenticity of musical expression and diversified approaches to songwriting, and has emerged as a culturally venerated music that is fundamentally about something.

Of course, the post-punk label means to evoke punk proper—the thrashing, stripped-down, in-your-face brand of rock and roll that exploded in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain in 1977 with the Sex Pistols

and the Clash and, with less fanfare but a few years earlier in the United States, with the CBGB's scene led by the Ramones and Television. From the beginning, punk music was oppositional and contrarian. On both sides of the Atlantic it opposed the seemingly discredited countercultural idealism of the 1960s and what punk musicians regarded as bloated, pretentious, inauthentic, mainstream rock and roll music. In the United States during the 1980s, the Reagan administration's conservative social policies and ardent militarism were common targets for the rage of hardcore punk particularly and post-punk generally. Unlike the decade's mainstream pop, which invoked themes of personal pleasure, sexual novelty, and transcendent escapism, post-punk more often examined public life, however caustically. Musicians and fans infused their frustrations, including those over the nation's conservative direction, with political, or at least proto-political, salvos at that rightward trend.

During the 1980s, post-punk music in the United States germinated underground, enjoying limited commercial success. While a handful of college radio stations disseminated the music, mainstream commercial radio ignored it. Post-punk bands were not seen in MTV music videos, the decade's signature popular culture medium. Yet post-punk persisted through the 1980s, coming to public light as "alternative" music and forging its way into the mainstream in the 1990s. Significantly, post-punk was not a top-down phenomenon, in which powerful record companies, units of still more powerful corporate conglomerates, through advertising and marketing hype foisted their musical acts on the public to ensure their popularity. Post-punk fans and musicians alike developed an identity as a community, one of whose salient attributes was opposition to the era's dominant musical, social, and political institutions.

Many cultural scholars, examining this music's relationship to the recording industry, have focused on the paradox of whether commercially produced music can truly challenge the institutions of capitalist society.¹ Indeed, before the age of musical downloads and file sharing, vertically integrated media conglomerates wielded massive, even prohibitive influence over what music was available to consumers. But for post-punk, at least, the meanings fans and performers ascribed to their own experience of enjoying and making music were less commercially mediated than the decade's major-label-disseminated popular music

backed by generous advertising budgets and—the mother of all promotional bonanzas—heavy rotation on MTV. Interaction at live performances, discussions in “fanzines,” musical innovation, underground subculture, and grassroots enthusiasm loomed significantly more important to post-punk.

Post-punk musicians and fans forged a shared identity in opposition to mainstream culture and politics. People in this community did not dress the same way or share the same values as their peers who embraced the era’s dominant social values. Post-punk fans often pursued jobs designed merely to pay the rent rather than career-oriented employment. They tended to oppose authority of all varieties—from the federal government to the local police. Though it would be an overstatement to portray a post-punk community unified in a set of orthodox political beliefs, most performers and fans deplored, for example, the Reagan administration’s intervention in Nicaragua. But what actions did they take to voice their outrage? Were the most engaged a minority of literate and politically sophisticated middle-class fans, or did post-punk fans of various social backgrounds share the same outlook?²² Many post-punk fans behaved apolitically, whereas people who never attended a Black Flag or Sonic Youth show opposed militarism in more activist ways, such as demonstrations and tax resistance. To be sure, diverse political attitudes existed among fans, exposing the gulf between culture and politics and suggesting limits to the extent to which a musical genre can unify its fans. Eighties post-punkers in the United States were not anywhere near as unified either musically or stylistically as the spiky-haired British punkers of the 1970s.³ Post-punk did not foster the kind of organized critique that mobilized public opinion to oust Reagan or the first George Bush electorally or through street rioting. Prior to 1991 it did not achieve sufficient sales figures to confer significant social or economic power upon even its most successful performers. Yet post-punk and its fans persisted throughout the 1980s despite this marginality, creatively challenging the conservative consensus. Understanding the meteoric rise of this music to popular acclaim after 1991 necessitates delving into post-punk’s protracted period of underground ferment.

From 1980 to 1991 post-punk enabled communities of fans to explore identities in opposition to mainstream social and political mores. “Community” often conjures up utopian imagery of an egalitarian

cooperative ethos, but in fact, communities are just as often defined relationally, by contrasting members with “others” on the outside looking in. The 1980s post-punk scene was not equally permeable to everyone; it sometimes demonstrated exclusionary impulses. Different subsets of post-punk—hardcore being the most obvious—periodically displayed hostility to those who didn’t live up to rigid strictures of punk authenticity. Yet on the whole, post-punk tended toward progressive political impulses, from inclusionary stances on race, class, and gender issues to rejecting yuppie materialism and interventionist American foreign policy. This worldview echoed through post-punk fanzines, bands’ music and lyrics, the causes with which post-punkers aligned themselves, and live performances.

Manifestly, post-punk fans and performers shared a distaste for the conservative social policies and militarist foreign policies of the 1980s, and tellingly, the community did not foster any splinter group that called itself Post-Punkers for Reagan. Opposition to mainstream culture, values, and politics was central to the identities of post-punk fans. And while an oppositional identity did not necessarily translate into oppositional activism, post-punk helped its fans maintain attitudes of resistance in their everyday lives that added up to an important critique of the mainstream. As the rock critic Greil Marcus wrote, “while revolution made by music is a joke, rebellion sustained by music might not be.”⁴ Post-punk musicians and fans sustained a subcultural rebellion whose reverberations echoed throughout the larger culture after 1991.

Defining Post-Punk

Musically, post-punk refers to a wide variety of guitar-based musics, ranging from the stylistic minimalism of early hardcore bands like Black Flag, the Dead Kennedys, and Minor Threat to the complex aural arrangements of Sonic Youth. Demographically, post-punk was overwhelmingly a phenomenon of white youth culture. Hardcore, a discrete subset of post-punk, emerged to unleash its straight-ahead no-frills sound as, more often than not, the voice of working-class rage. Inspired by the music and attitude of 1970s punk, post-punk had sufficiently established itself as a discrete musical genre by the early

1980s. A sampling of bands sketches the genre's boundaries. The Dead Kennedys, Black Flag, and Minor Threat comprise a trio of influential, stylistically minimalistic bands that struggled to make the music more accessible to fans, from the Dead Kennedys' Jello Biafra's infamous court battle with the Parents Music Resource Center to Minor Threat's policy of exclusively playing in all-ages venues.⁵ Sonic Youth and the Minutemen culled from punk's raw materials and added various musical experiments and innovations to expand the genre. Members of Sonic Youth were associated with the No Wave musical movement and the New York avant-garde composer Glenn Branca before starting the band, while the Minutemen, who incorporated jazz and funk riffs, were once called "America's Most Conceptual Bar Band."⁶ The Minneapolis-based Hüsker Dü began in 1981 as a hardcore band with a reputation for playing fast, then recorded the 1984 concept album *Zen Arcade*, about a day in the life of a skinhead, ultimately signing with Warner Bros. in 1986 for its final two albums, which interspersed acoustic ballads with distorted electric guitar songs.

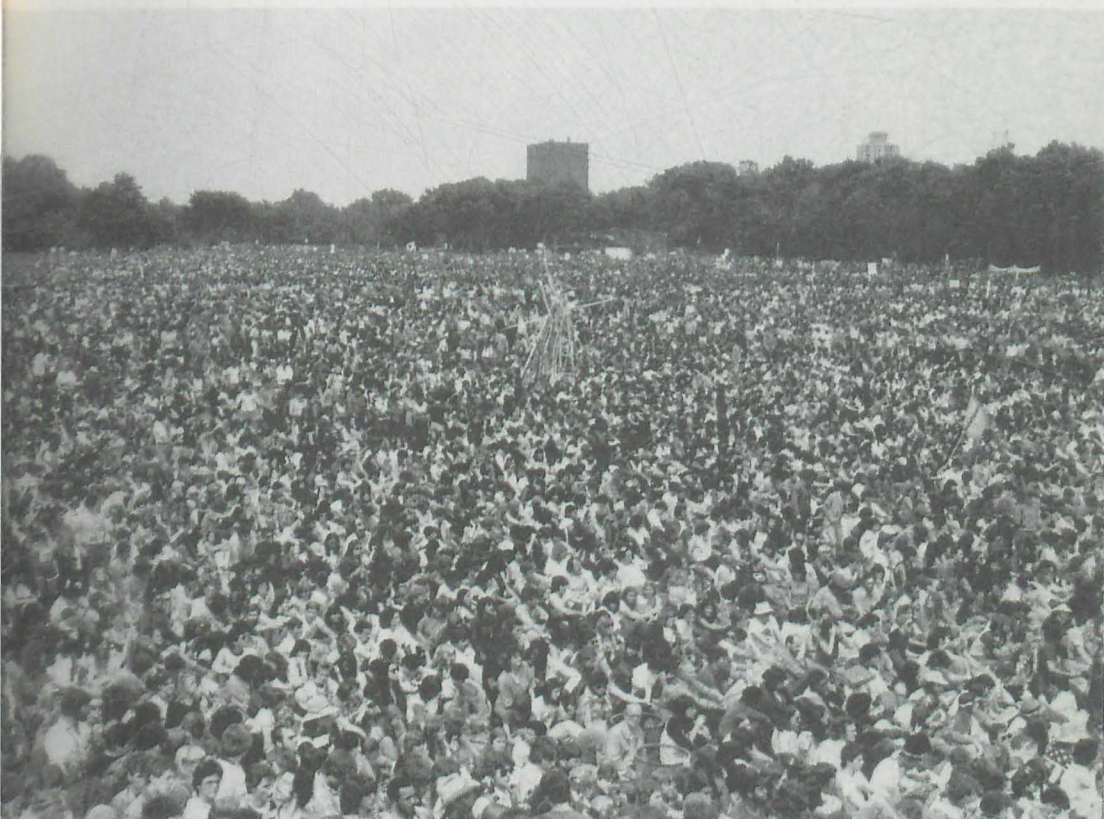
The Replacements and R.E.M. shed light on post-punk's elasticity. Both came from the small club, independent label roots that epitomize post-punk, yet both achieved popular acclaim well before the genre's commercial breakthrough in 1991. The Red Hot Chili Peppers shared similar underground roots but relied heavily on African American-inflected musical forms such as funk, rap, and hip-hop.⁷ What tied these disparate bands together was less a shared musical aesthetic than a set of influences from 1970s punk, including a do-it-yourself production ethos emphasizing authenticity rather than technological perfection; aural dissonance that consciously challenged mainstream popular music; transgressive subject matter in lyrics and associated visual imagery; and live performances that attempted to bridge the distance between the performers and the audience.⁸

Post-punk prized what the Minutemen termed going "econo," cutting production costs through often unpolished independent production and even establishing fledgling alternative distribution systems. This aesthetic echoed the British rock critic Simon Frith's observation that 1970s punk embodied "a people's version of consumerism, the idea that record buyers had a right to maximum market choice, that record buying should involve customer expression rather than producer manipulation." Since the late 1960s, independent record labels largely

served a research-and-development function for the majors, who scooped up acts as soon as they reached a bankable level of popularity. But this practice reflected the vision of the corporate owners of the major record labels more than that of the music's performers or its fans. Many fans, such as one who wrote a letter to the seminal fanzine *Flipside*, recognized a trend that the "independence" punk bands "once cherished is increasingly being lost as bands get popular and sign record deals." "The independent record distribution scene," the letter continued, "has just become a smaller model of the larger 'mainstream' record market."⁹ While this fan's testimony indicated awareness of corporate domination of making and distributing music, his regret signified fans' substantial emotional investment in the indies.

Post-punk fans believed they were making important consumer choices by buying independently produced records, and musicians believed they were challenging major label hegemony by making their music available through the independents. A review of 1980s fanzines shows that the independent labels played to this ethos of ethical consumerism in their advertisements. When Catch Trout Records, a Charlottesville, Virginia, independent ran ads with the slogan "CATCH TROUT . . . making music worthless again," reclaiming "worthless" as a positive attribute, the appeal courted a fan sensibility that resisted the commodification of its favorite music. Likewise, the distributor Rough Trade's ads proclaimed "Specializing in **INDEPENDENT** import and domestic Hardcore, Experimental, Industrial, Dance and the Undefinable," emphasizing the most important word this way to underscore that independently produced music was a quality fans valued. The California mail-order outfit Mamma Jamma's gimmick to sell its stock involved the promise of "ALL YOUR FAVORITE *INDEPENDENT LABEL RECORDS & TAPES*C.D.S.," again suggesting through prominent size and capitalization that fans prized independence. In invoking independence to promote musical and purchasing loyalty, one ad stands out. The Las Vegas record store the Underground sought to sell the business with the following appeal: "Since 1980, The Underground has been Las Vegas' only alternative music store supporting the independent industry."¹⁰ Presumably, what the Underground was selling as a business opportunity was its loyal customer base, whose coherence was defined by fans' loyalty to the "independent industry."

Though major labels largely controlled independent producers by



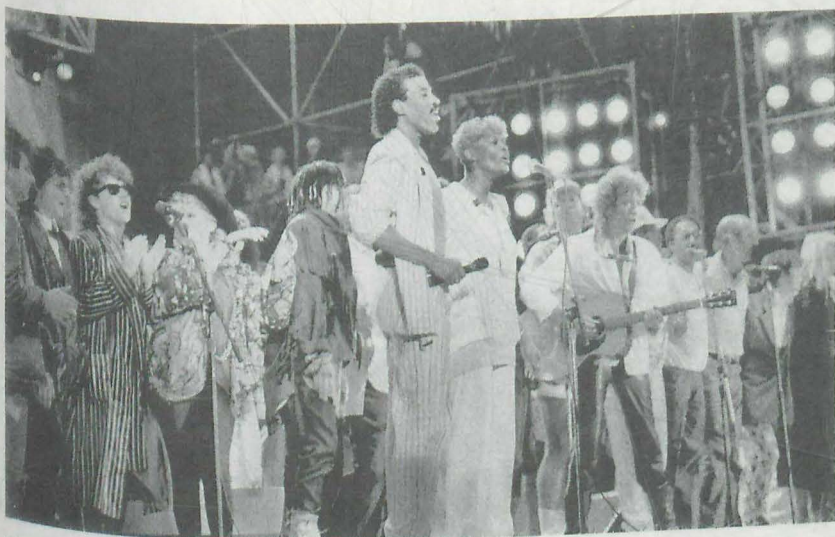
The nuclear freeze movement mobilized 750,000 for this mass demonstration in New York City's Central Park, June 12, 1982. (Jenny Warburg)



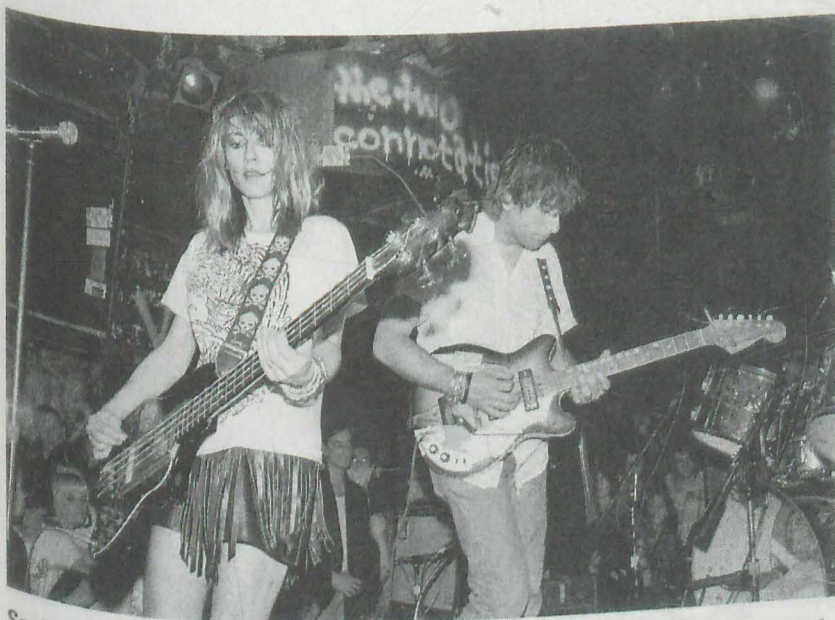
Cornell shantytown, 1985. The shanties were constructed to occupy a centrally located campus space and disrupt business as usual. As one activist remarked, "The administration could not avoid it. It was a radical transformation of public space." (David Lyons)



The shanties at Dartmouth, 1986: "an eyesore on an idyllic campus." This assault on campus aesthetics provoked the wrath of campus conservatives. (Stuart Bratesman/Dartmouth College)



The Live Aid finale, 1985. Widely hailed as a reawakening of social conscience amid the materialistic 1980s, aided by satellite technology, Live Aid also served as a model of the transnational "mega-event" in which the performers' star power leveraged mammoth financial returns for a worthy cause. (Ebet Roberts)



Sonic Youth at CBGB, 1989. Rooted as much in the avant-garde as in punk, it took Sonic Youth a decade to achieve a fraction of the acclaim Nirvana reaped almost overnight. After aiding Nirvana's rise, Sonic Youth bucked a stereotypical trend, becoming increasingly politicized *after* signing a major-label deal. (Ebet Roberts)



Harold Washington at the West Lawn Branch Library, 1986. First elected in a racially polarizing campaign, as his mayoralty wore on, Washington was making strides toward effectively reaching out to groups of white Chicagoans (like this one) before his untimely death. (Chicago Public Library, Special Collections and Preservation Division)



On the campaign trail in 1984, Geraldine Ferraro proved more compelling to many than her partner at the top of the ticket, Walter Mondale: "Ferraro is one hell of a lady," a Cleveland policeman gushed. "I just wish we could have Reagan with her." (Minnesota Historical Society)



ACT UP was notable for its militancy and direct action tactics, epitomized by its signature chant, "ACT UP! Fight Back! Fight AIDS!" (Clay Walker)



Gran Fury, a collective of artists associated with ACT UP, designed arresting graphics to combat misinformation about the AIDS crisis and agitate for a more urgent response. "Kissing Doesn't Kill" appropriated the visual style of a popular ad campaign to debunk mythology about how the disease is transmitted. (1989 Aldo Hernandez, courtesy of Creative Time)

dominating distribution channels, there were exceptions. Alternative distributors such as Mordam Records, Dutch East India, and Rough Trade persevered through the 1980s and beyond.¹¹ The story of Mordam Records illustrates the incomplete nature of the majors' hegemony over distribution. Ruth Schwartz founded Mordam in 1983, aided by a collaboration of the Dead Kennedys' Alternative Tentacles label and Tim Yohannan's influential fanzine, *Maximumrocknroll*. Schwartz hoped that independent labels and magazine publishers would band together under Mordam's distributorship for financial viability. Along with this economic strategy, Schwartz articulated opposition to the majors: "What independent music is about, is anger against major labels and the music business on all levels." She favorably contrasted the mind-set of personnel involved in independent music at Mordam—"we're a bunch of fans!"—with "big major multimedia corporations," of which she claimed, "They're not there for the artists. They're not there for the artist's fans."¹² While it is easy to romanticize independent music personnel as heroic holdouts against corporate co-optation, their populist language bespoke real commitment. Despite the fact that majors exercised the majority of control over what music was available to consumers throughout the eighties, the marginal but persistent presence of independent distribution remained an important expression of autonomy and opposition for post-punk and its fans.

Another salient legacy of punk in post-punk centers on noise. Seventies punk deployed a new brand of harsh guitar noise, from the jagged chords of the Sex Pistols to the Ramones "primitive buzzsaw sound." Post-punk likewise mobilized noise to its advantage. In the 1980s, musicians as diverse as the Dead Kennedys and Sonic Youth self-consciously enshrined noise—"a jangling, aural buzzing, cacophony"—as a signal convention of the genre. To post-punk audiences, noise acted as a kind of rite of passage. Membership in the musical community depended not only on passing a toleration threshold for amplified sonic dissonance, but on reveling in its inaccessibility to patrons of mainstream pop.

Post-punk also borrowed from punk's penchant for transgressive subject matter, crafting lyrics and visual images calculated to shock middle-class sensibilities and invert what was prestigious in mainstream culture.¹³ Band naming strategies illustrated this tendency, resulting in the Circle Jerks, Crucifucks, Social Distortion, the Dead Kennedys, and the Butthole Surfers, for starters. Visual images associated with

post-punk ranged from the Butthole Surfers' films, showed at live performances and depicting penis reconstruction surgery, to the all-women band L7's T-shirts picturing a dominating female forcing cunnilingus on a submissive male. Even the arty Sonic Youth explored a fascination with the Manson Family in "Death Valley '69" and "Expressway to Your Skull," which was narrated from the point of view of a cult member who crooned, "We're gonna kill the California girls." Using transgressive subject matter sometimes proved problematic, since the musicians had little control over how their work was interpreted, but in the conservative 1980s, lyrics could be transgressive simply by opposing popular sentiment, such as Reagan-era militarism. In "Themselves," the Minutemen sang, "All these men who work the land / Should evaluate themselves / And make a stand / Can't they see beyond the rhetoric? / The lies and promises that don't mean shit."¹⁴ "Themselves" fit into the Minutemen's repertoire of antimilitarist songs, its lyrics challenging mainstream rural Americans who celebrated Reagan's program of restoring military strength and voted for him in large numbers.

Post-Punk and Its Fans

Punk bequeathed to post-punk a tradition of performers who tried to reduce the distance between themselves and their fans both literally and figuratively. This approach rejected the arena rock of the 1970s and beyond, which paired rock demigods backed by elaborate stage sets and flanked by giant columns of stack amplifiers with mass audiences who were forced to pony up escalating sums of hard-earned cash for the privilege of attendance. *Flipside's* editors bemoaned the closing of one punk venue, Al's Bar, and applauded the opening of another, Godzilla's, proclaiming, "Bring punk back to the CLUBS where it belongs, fuck the arenas!!!" Post-punk venues offered a cheaper alternative to the high ticket prices found at arena concerts. Fans experienced shows from a standing position, with no assigned seating, allowing them to roam around the club freely. This in turn allowed more fans to attend shows because the legal capacity of clubs expanded when there were no seats. Hardcore bands like Washington, D.C.'s Minor Threat agitated for minors to be allowed into clubs that served alcohol. D.C. clubs secured a compromise, allowing minors into the clubs if their hands were

marked with an X, signifying that they could not drink. The X mark came to symbolize fan solidarity in D.C.'s hardcore community.¹⁵

Like punk, post-punk brandished a do-it-yourself ethos that lessened the gap between audience and performer by eliminating technical virtuosity as a prerequisite for making music. These democratized attitudes surrounding music making encouraged fans to start a band and make their own music. Fans came to feel that they were not so different from the musicians they admired. The fans also resisted the labeling and categorization of their musical passions. When asked in a survey "What are your three favorite bands?" several respondents who were self-identified post-punk fans refused to be pinned down, with responses such as "keeps changing regularly," "too many to mention," "don't play favorites with innovative music," and "no favorites all faves." Unlike the decade's heavy metal fans, who relished the opportunity to nominate bands they believed epitomized the genre, post-punk fans, out of respect for the music's diversity, routinely declined to identify individual groups as representative of the genre. Instead, they took pains to demonstrate their openness to musical innovation, listing blues, country-western, jazz, folk, classical, rockabilly, Brazilian, Cajun, and even Hawaiian mambo as musical styles that inspired them.¹⁶

Post-punk fans contrasted their musical tastes with the pop mainstream. They preferred recorded music to radio, eschewing the music that received popular airplay. Despite the meteoric rise of MTV, post-punk fans resoundingly rejected music videos and the commercially popular artists they showcased. Their rejection of radio and music videos in favor of independent-label-recorded music showed resistance to the role of the majors, and the corporate power that buttressed them, in shaping musical taste. Post-punkers insisted on the individuality of their musical preferences. Asked what elements of his favorite local bands' music were most important, one fan, a musician himself, cited "interesting & original arrangements." Another fan who played guitar listed her reasons for liking the Boston bands Letters to Cleo and O-Positive as "originality, different from the mainstream, fun." When identifying the most important elements of a good band, fans included responses such as "originality andchutzpah," "weirdness and originality," "distinct band sound," and "fuckedupness." Though one fan thought "beer" vital to a good band and another admitted a fondness for "cute" bands, musical originality was clearly prized.¹⁷

Fans valued sincerity and honesty in live performances, citing these qualities, along with "a sincere sense of abandon," as reasons to embrace their favorite bands. Local live performance scenes emphasized independence from the mainstream music industry. Post-punk's lore is crammed with tales of local live music overcoming traditional commercial and social authorities, such as the December 1981 Social Distortion show that was broken up by police and continued ad hoc from the band's warehouse rehearsal space.¹⁸

Though a group of post-punk fans and performers explicitly repudiated any engagement with politics, another contingent considered themselves activist-musicians or viewed their fandom itself as a political statement. Still others rejected any overt connection between music and politics but believed post-punk could support political activity through events such as benefit shows. Despite ambivalent voices, post-punk musicians and fans tended toward rebellion against the Reagan-Bush era's dominant social and political trends. Often this rebellion proved inchoate or did not take the form of activist politics, but reflected the kind of everyday resistance that ultimately exerted subtle effects on the decade's cultural balance of power.¹⁹

Post-Punk and Antimilitarism

Post-punk's politics appeared most explicitly in its rejection of militarism. As military spending rose and interventions from Lebanon to Grenada and throughout Central America became commonplace, post-punk musicians opposed military aggression. Antimilitarism ranked among hardcore's most popular and salient themes. In part, this reflected a self-interested desire to avoid military service. The reinstatement of the draft was a growing fear among the nation's young under Reagan, especially among hardcore's working-class constituency. Throughout post-punk as a whole, the pervasive theme of antimilitarism amounted to more than a dollop of skepticism toward the dominant culture's bellicose rhetoric. The decade's cult of militarism extended beyond official foreign policy, gaining a foothold in popular culture. Screen heroes, led by Sylvester Stallone's Rambo character, glorified nationalism, vigilantism, and violence. Tom Clancy's novels of international intrigue, such as *The Hunt for Red October* and *Red*

Storm Rising, epitomized a wave of bestseller fiction that buttressed American patriotism against a Soviet menace that in hindsight proved near to its ultimate demise. Popular culture's embrace of militarism and nationalism attracted post-punk's derision and opposition.²⁰

In 1981 the Dead Kennedys rewrote their song "California Über Alles" and retitled it "We've Got a Bigger Problem Now." This song mentioned Reagan by name and explicitly deplored the implications of his rise to power, raising the specter of American youth serving as cannon fodder in a "Third World War." That same year, in a visual indictment of the consequences of militarism, the cover of Hüsker Dü's *Land Speed Record* pictured three officers overlooking rows of military coffins with American flags draped over them. "Stars and Stripes" by the Circle Jerks highlighted the consequences of nuclear proliferation, chiding Reagan's supporters: "Ha, ha, ha you're all gonna die / and you voted for that guy." The lyrics of these songs focused sarcastic criticism and a sprinkling of mischievous humor on the Reagan administration's martial tone. Their use of irony, a hallmark of post-punk attitude and aesthetics, reflected the legacy of seventies punk's critique of sentimentalism. Post-punk aesthetics allowed for disagreement with institutional authority but resisted easy identification with any specific political position. Even a band as overtly political as the Minutemen prefaced a live version of "Little Man with a Gun in His Hand" with the jibe "This one's for the Gorbachevs and the Reagans . . . May they sleep well tonight."²¹

In addition to the lyrical assault on militarism, post-punkers expressed opposition more directly. The 1982–83 Rock Against Reagan hardcore tour culminated with a Fourth of July concert on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Left-wing groups routinely erected information tables at hardcore shows. At Minutemen shows the band's guitarist and songwriter D. Boon distributed U.S. OUT OF CENTRAL AMERICA bumper stickers and encouraged fans to boo Ronald Reagan. Fanzines brimmed with fan letters opposing the conservative national political culture. "Somebetty," a Bloomington, Indiana, fan, listed such progressive organizations as Women Strike for Peace and Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press for fans to join. Writing in *Flipside*, a fan named Jim deplored a disturbing trend he perceived in American life—abridgments of civil liberties, such as drug testing and the use of police roadblocks to arrest drunk drivers, and military escalation he compared

to Nazi Germany. Signing off, he quipped, "Remember a vote for a Republican is a vote for War in '88. Ed Norton for President."²² Jim's letter evoked antagonism toward the main currents of national politics more clearly than any vision of where that opposition might lead. His suggestion that Norton—the simpleton character on the iconic 1950s television sitcom *The Honeymooners*—would be a preferable presidential candidate mined popular culture for an alternative to Reagan. This rebellious refusal of the mainstream political possibilities emblemized post-punk's fascination with pop culture kitsch, a frequent surrogate for more direct political engagement.

Post-punk kitsch, iconoclasm, and ironic irreverence complicate attempts to analyze fans' politics. Asked "Who is your favorite recent public figure?" fans most frequently produced ironic responses drawn from popular culture and crafted for shock value. Poking fun at the question, they mocked the notion of reverence for public figures, repudiating politics proper. Paradoxically, however, many post-punk fans did not hesitate to identify which political causes and issues they considered most important. Support for a pro-choice position on abortion rights emerged at the forefront of their concerns, followed by "funding AIDS research," "environmental issues," "better education," and "cutting military spending." At the same time, fans rejected the conservative causes that marked the Reagan-Bush years, such as the "war on drugs," "fighting crime," and "cutting welfare spending." Ultimately, post-punk fans demonstrated ambiguous attitudes toward politics. On one hand they displayed a knee-jerk impulse to reject any interest in politics—suggesting that post-punk culture might more accurately be regarded as alternative rather than oppositional. Yet upon self-reflection, fans acknowledged specific political issues that they cared about, sometimes enough to merit active engagement. Not surprisingly, the issues that elicited the most fervent responses were those that most directly affected young people. This ambiguity illuminates a more complex picture of 1980s youth than the media portrait typified by *Time's* 1990 cover story that used broad strokes to paint the "twentysomething" generation as politically apathetic.²³

Though many fans viewed the presence of politics in the music warily, some professed admiration for bands associated with particular issues. An Austin, Texas, fan identified Fugazi with pro-choice, poverty, and anti-police-brutality issues, and one from Boston remarked that her favorite bands were involved with women's issues. The majority revealed

a discomfort with music that was intentionally political, at the same time maintaining an openness to and acknowledgment of a relationship between music and progressive politics. A Providence record store buyer typified this attitude, preferring music "free of statements." "Bands playing benefits or quietly making donations to pet projects/causes is fine," he contended, but he cautioned, "Singing about social/political issues that everyone already agrees on as if it were a bold or daring statement is silly. Singing a song against child abuse for instance." Though underscoring his belief in the futility of bands playing overtly political songs, this fan affirmed music's legitimacy as an element surrounding and supporting political activity, and he sought to move beyond "preaching to the converted" in favor of a strategy that reached a broader audience. Tellingly, the fan described his own politics as "Democratic Far Left," a spirit that applied to numerous post-punks even if many would have shunned the label. Though post-punk lacked a unified "Democratic Far Leftist" vision, there was a symbolic fit between its values, lifestyles, musical expressions, and political leanings, which all aligned to resist mainstream society and, frequently, electoral politics.²⁴ Post-punkers rejected the conservative Republican aesthetic of the Reagan-Bush era more than fashioning themselves as political insurgents.

Race, Gender, and Proletarian Play: Identity Politics in Post-Punk

Though post-punk represented an overwhelmingly white form of youth culture, racial matters generated wide-ranging commentary. Letters to the editor in *Flipside* and *Maximumrocknroll* (MRR) consistently brought discussions of race to the fore. Often the letter writers responded to letters from previous issues, allowing for whole dialogues about race to unfold in the fanzines. The editorial staffs printed letters from fans who criticized their counterparts for displaying unenlightened racial attitudes. The editors' replies sought to elevate and refine the racial discussions appearing in their publications.²⁵

A 1985 issue of MRR featured several letters responding to the right-leaning political views of the New York City hardcore band Agnostic Front. Though never espousing any particular political program, the band members were, for instance, critics of the welfare state and champions of militaristic foreign policy. Some of the letters defended

Agnostic Front, claiming that they could not be held responsible for the right-wing politics of certain skinhead groups connected to violence at some New York shows. Tim Yohannan's editorial reply, however, repudiated this defense and further impugned the band's politics by reprinting a section of an interview in which band members defended U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua as an appropriate response to "Communist aggression." This exchange typified the ideological dynamics of the fanzines. Though the 'zines printed letters expressing conservative points of view, the editors consistently used their editorial power to refute the positions of these fans. The concluding letter criticized Agnostic Front for defending the racism of Great Britain's right-wing National Front. The letter quoted a passage from an Agnostic Front interview that amounted to a damning apology for the National Front's racism.²⁶ Placing this letter last in the series of letters about the controversial band, *MRR*'s editors deftly positioned it as the authoritative voice.

Fanzines generally characterized racial prejudice as unique to a specific subgroup of hardcore skinheads. In 1987 Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARP) formed to counter what they viewed as the mainstream media's unfair characterization of skinheads as racist. Referring to the growing power of television talk shows in the 1980s, a female skinhead from Richmond, Virginia, wrote, "I'm sick and tired of being called a nazi and a white supremacist by people who watched Oprah Winfrey and Morten Downey, Jr.!!"²⁷ A cadre of post-punkers proactively sought to change the music's image as a prohibitively white brand of youth culture. The all-white Red Hot Chili Peppers fused elements of punk, funk, heavy metal, and rap, expanding the music's parameters beyond its roots in 1970s punk, which often bleached out black musical influences. The Minutemen incorporated jazz and funk riffs to widen the already capacious genre's boundaries. Members of Sonic Youth and Firehose collaborated as Ciccone Youth for a single album that combined punk and rap styles and covered hits by such acts as Madonna and Robert Palmer, spoofing the artifice of mainstream pop.²⁸ Organizers of the Rock Against Reagan concerts encouraged black rap and Latino bands to perform alongside white hardcore bands. Fans who witnessed Rock Against Reagan's racially mixed musical lineups tried to influence their counterparts in other cities to organize similar events and to get bands to perform at benefits for causes such

as antiapartheid groups and Chicano Mexican community centers.²⁹ Though in one sense fan activism for events to promote racial unity acknowledged that racial discord existed within the community, it also adopted the forward-looking stance that post-punk's progressive impulses would be better served by musical hybridity and multiculturalism, as well as by social intermingling with black and Latino communities and cultures.

Though hardcore's subculture was palpably working class, the larger alternative rock scene represented a diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds. Post-punk thrived in what one might call the interstices of the class structure. Writing of British punk in the 1970s, Simon Frith argued that punk did not represent the authentic "voice of unemployed youth" so much as a strident expression of "the bohemian challenge to orderly consumption."³⁰ In other words, Frith was suggesting that punk anger was less rooted in class anger and orthodox political challenges to the established social order than it was enmeshed in a creative, and even fun, cultural project of shaking up the moral complacency of modern consumer capitalism. Frith's model applied equally well to post-punk, which also featured vigorous explorations of "proletarian play"—that is, rough-and-tumble behaviors and styles not normally associated with middle-class respectability and comfort. During the Reagan-Bush era this meant that post-punk relished flouting a set of mainstream material aspirations stoked by media images that venerated affluence and conspicuous consumption.

Fanzines spoofed and scorned middle-class consumer mentalities and searched for bohemian alternatives. A letter to the editor in *MRR* from Doug, a fan recently enrolled at the University of Idaho, described his exposure to punk subculture in San Francisco. Doug praised the tolerant nature of the Bay Area and its alternative music community. He then admitted to a period of disillusionment with the scene, when he considered becoming "a contributing member of twisted society." Ultimately, however, provoked by northern Idaho's conservative political climate, he decided to reaffirm his nonconformity despite the physical and verbal harassment he often encountered. He explained how, upon arriving in Idaho, he observed "the intense brain-washing and propagandization of the government-controlled media." In the same overstated mode Doug alluded to "the shocking, hideous truth of those in power (pro war, sexism, racism, corporate-control, mind control, rich

supremacy)." His choice of villains reveals that his disaffection involved not only the conservative agenda of the Reagan era but also the media's complicity in institutionalizing that worldview. Doug's language, despite obvious dramatic embellishment, bore more than a passing resemblance to what First Lady Hillary Clinton, a decade later, famously called a "vast right-wing conspiracy" between conservative politicians and the media. His remark about "rich supremacy" expressed distaste for the decade's abandonment of the social contract and its corresponding emphasis on personal gain, which he contrasted with his own personal sacrifice in "resisting the fruits of Reagan's reign."³¹ Doug shared with like-minded post-punk fans a politics that featured an aversion to consume or participate in anything that might reek of class privilege, a sentiment that existed regardless of whether their parents were doctors, capitalists, or hailed from legitimately working-class backgrounds.

Post-punk attitudes toward consumerism reflected a critique of corporate rapaciousness and a spunky economic populism. In 1986 an *MRR* reader sought to mobilize others to join a boycott of Coors products to protest the Rockies' leading beer producer's support for a raft of conservative causes. He informed readers of the *National Boycott Newsletter*, a publication that covered activist causes "from the destruction of the rainforests to which corporations fund the contras." Another fan protested inflated ticket prices at shows, urging his counterparts not to attend and bands not to play high-priced shows. Several bands sympathized and took steps to provide access to their shows for the widest range of fans. The bands Fugazi and Minor Threat maintained a policy of playing only all-ages shows and shunning venues that charged more than \$6 per ticket. Similarly, Pearl Jam battled mightily, infamously, and litigiously with Ticketmaster's exorbitant ticket surcharges, arguing that the practice inflated already high prices, excluding regular fans who could not afford such purchases.³² Although the courts ultimately upheld the surcharges, Pearl Jam's stand against Ticketmaster demonstrated resistance in an era when mainstream musical acts remained content to perform arena shows at steep ticket prices without questioning such policies.

Post-punks who explored "proletarian play" experienced an exhilaration that helps explain their participation in this distinctive subcultural "scene." An anonymous female fan remarked of her initial attraction to hardcore:

The first show I went to was great. I felt I had finally found a place where I belonged. Slamming was a trip. It was dangerous, it was senseless; to me it was a perfect manifestation of the chaos inside of me. In those days I was very optimistic. I was sure I was becoming part of a group that was unified and supportive. I thought we were going to change something and make a difference in the world . . . when I was knocked down someone picked me up; when my lip bled, someone wiped it off. When I was hit I felt the pain, but pain was not new to me and the feeling of camaraderie in the crowd of dancers was well worth any bruises I accumulated.³³

This fan's excitement with slam dancing and the sense of community it engendered permeated not only hardcore but post-punk generally, entering the mainstream in the early 1990s as "moshing." The rock journalist Rachel Felder observed, "Moshing releases aggressions," putting "parameters around physical violence" but also allowing young fans to express anger.³⁴ In other words, it represented a way of playing at violence or roughness that allowed participants to mark their difference from the banal niceties of middle-class culture.

For female fans the rough play sometimes proved less cathartic than frustrating. Some expressed disillusionment with the escalating roughness of slam pits, and they blamed skinheads for the violence. One considered her options for coping with the problem: "I suppose I could become a skinhead girl and if I acted tough enough, maybe I would be accepted that way. It is funny that I have to speak of looking a certain way in order to be accepted in a scene that is supposed to condemn conformity."³⁵ The exclusivity this fan described contradicted the professed politics of the subculture, which supposedly represented a haven for youth opting out of the mainstream. Accounts like hers opened the door to questions about how oppositional hardcore really was, given its male dominance and its aversion to challenging traditional gender roles.³⁶

A female Iowa City fan picked up on this and penned a letter to the editor of a leading fanzine recommending classic feminist texts by Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Brownmiller to enlighten fans on gender issues and expressing frustration with hardcore's reconstitution of traditional gender roles.³⁷ Though female hardcore fans may have faced

limitations because of gender, in post-punk outside of hardcore many women enjoyed expanding musical possibilities. Women flourished in 1980s post-punk, asserting themselves as instrumentalists and songwriters and escaping the stereotypical girl vocalist role. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, all-women bands flourished, led by L7, Babes in Toyland, and Bikini Kill. Their music, lyrics, attitudes, and styles used post-punk as a forum for wide-ranging expression challenging gender stereotypes. Women post-punkers juxtaposed traditionally feminine clothing, such as undersized "baby-doll dresses," with tough-looking boots. Kim Gordon, Sonic Youth's bassist, proved particularly influential to the decade's wave of all-women bands.³⁸ Gordon's songwriting consistently addressed issues that affect women specifically, such as sexual harassment and anorexia. The battle over women's public sexual persona persisted as a primary concern of post-punk women. Members of L7 tried not to wear clothing that was too revealing, fearing that their music would not be taken seriously. They condemned the female heavy metal artist Lita Ford, who exploited her sexuality to increase her popularity, wearing garter belts and pantomiming sexual intercourse with the microphone in music videos. Suzi Gardner, L7's lead vocalist and guitar player, implied that she felt adopting a version of female sexuality such as Ford's would encourage fans to trivialize the band's music.³⁹ Post-punk women's thoughtfulness about how to represent themselves underscored the difference between these women and many mainstream women musicians at the time, even those as controversial and intermittently subversive as Madonna, who nevertheless routinely sexualized their personae to heighten their commercial appeal. In an era when mainstream popular culture aggressively buttressed patriarchy, post-punk's subversion of traditional feminine style amounted to the kind of everyday rebellion that frequently erupts in groups outside official channels of power or prestige.⁴⁰

1991: Nirvana's *Nevermind*, Lollapalooza, and the Politics of Co-optation

During the 1980s, post-punk remained marginal in the marketplace as bands enjoyed little commercial success. After 1991, however, post-punk exploded into the cultural mainstream, as betokened by the

documentary film *1991: The Year Punk Broke*. The title was a telling double entendre, highlighting the music's remarkable ascent to popular acclaim while also connoting the fear of compromised authenticity and co-optation that accompanied mainstream success. In 1991 guitar-based rock-and-roll music in the "post-punk" tradition made a quantum leap commercially, led by Nirvana's *Nevermind*, which sold 3.5 million copies in the last four months of that year alone. The popular press lauded "Smells Like Teen Spirit," the album's hit single, as a generational anthem. Grunge rock, a post-punk subgenre associated with a group of Seattle bands including Nirvana, spawned its own fashion trend, with pricy designer lumberjack shirts reaching high-fashion runways, and with kids who were previously devotees of Top 40 radio, chic jeans, and Vuarnet sunglasses "flying the flannel," in the lexicon coined by the Firehose bassist, Mike Watt, to describe mainstream youth's beeline for the post-punk bandwagon. Major record labels rushed to sign bands previously regarded as lacking commercial potential, capitalizing on the genre's newfound popularity. Commercial success changed the discussion surrounding the music, prompting the mainstream press to ask whether it could maintain its oppositional posture. Articles titled "Alternative to What?" and "Is Lollapalooza Losing Its Outsider Status?" examined the mainstreaming of post-punk, raising more questions than they answered about whether music with commercial aspirations, however alternative, could retain its critical edge. But why did post-punk become popular at that particular moment? Uncanny parallels abounded between 1991 in the United States and British punk circa 1977. The musical innovation of both cultural epochs displaced a rock and pop culture dominated by superstars who remained distant from their fans. British punk and American post-punk both surfaced when their countries of origin were mired in economic recessions. British punk, epitomized by the Sex Pistols, and American post-punk led by Nirvana emerged to fill a national void in moments where youth were ripe for a resurgence of music with a rebellious spirit.⁴¹

To the untrained eye (or ear), Nirvana and its ilk shot to prominence overnight, emerging with a sonic vengeance from the Seattle drizzle. But, as with many overnight successes, this picture belies the deeper roots and protracted struggle that led to post-punk's flowering. One enthusiast argued that though music in the 1980s was often derided for

its lack of innovation, post-punk cognoscenti regarded it as rock's "most fertile decade," as the era's lesser-known independently produced music bubbled with creative ferment. While many of post-punk's most influential bands started out on independent labels like SST, Touch and Go, and Sub Pop, by the late 1980s the major labels caught on to the music's commercial potential. In 1986 Hüsker Dü left SST and signed with Warner Bros. for its *Candy Apple Grey* album. In the wake of the signing, some of the original fan base felt alienated and charged the band with "selling out" and abandoning its politics. Hüsker Dü's Bob Mould defended the move to a major label as a bid to reach a wider audience, arguing that the band remained true to its ideals and that its conception of politics was broadening beyond the formula of topical songs each addressing individual issues. Debates such as this one, carried out ritually in the fanzines' pages, closely foreshadowed popular press debates in the wake of Nirvana's success.⁴² By decade's end, a growing legion of seminal post-punk bands—including Firehose (two-thirds of whose members were from the Minutemen), the Replacements, Dinosaur Jr., and, perhaps most important, Sonic Youth—questing for expanded audiences and a greater opportunity to earn a living through their craft, made the break and signed with major labels.

Bands like Sonic Youth, which took almost a decade to garner a fraction of the popularity that Nirvana achieved virtually overnight, faithfully toiled "underground" throughout the 1980s, opening cultural space for Nirvana's popular success. Though prior to signing with Geffen in 1990, Sonic Youth was affiliated with a number of independent labels such as Homestead, Blast First, and SST, the band's career path challenged typical arguments about "selling out" and cultural co-optation. Their early work was characterized by aural experimentation—such as tuning the band's two guitars one quarter note apart to produce a dissonant wall of sound—and impressionistic lyrics often delivered with an ironic distance and frequently defying interpretation. Beginning with *Goo*, Sonic Youth's 1990 major label debut, the band's politics actually became more overt. Songs like "Swimsuit Issue," "Tunic (Song for Karen)," and "Youth Against Fascism" supplied eminently hip music with savvy commentary on topics ranging from sexual objectification and the male gaze to eating disorders and combating hate speech.⁴³ The band's increasing politicization after signing to a major label gave the lie to the old saw that bands

signing to majors were sellouts incapable of delivering any meaningful message. Sonic Youth personally aided Nirvana's rise by providing a liaison with a Geffen Artist and Repertoire representative in 1990 and selecting Nirvana as the opening act for their 1991 European tour.

Along with increasing major label interest in "underground" music, another factor enabled Nirvana's commercial breakthrough—an increasingly cohesive sense of identity among post-punk fans, honed over a decade of shared experiences in the clubs, in the pages of fanzines and underground newspapers, and in the aisles of retail outlets devoted to making independent music available to its discerning followers. A set of recurring political sensibilities pervaded these locales, helping this community to cohere. Patrick, a Colorado Springs native, typified the community's outlook. When defending the place of politics in post-punk, he remarked, "People think that enough has been said about Ronald Reagan, war, nuclear holocaust, cops and governments. Well, I don't." "A lot has been said and a lot of people have been working really hard," he continued, "but the things that we hate have not gone away. So why should I not sing about what sucks and what should be done about it just because others feel the same way and have voiced their opinions before me?" Patrick proceeded to defend the Dead Kennedys against charges of "selling out," praising the band for broadening the reach of its message and urging fans to pool their "collective power together against the system" as a strategy for survival.⁴⁴ Though he left his choice of targets unspecific, with "the system" evoking a dose of generalized paranoia, those in the post-punk community would have been able to pinpoint the system's chief elements: militarism, social conservatism, rampant materialism, and Reagan himself. At the very least, Patrick's comments conveyed post-punkers' sense of engagement with politics adversarial to the decade's main currents.

Other fans called for a move to "other directions of political work," advocating moving beyond political lyrics that simply preached to the converted. A fan named Dave cautioned fans not to fall into the "subculture trap"—maintaining a cool and unique style and attitude at the expense of limited influence on those outside the community. Arguing that post-punk was vulnerable to charges of exclusivity, he pleaded for a more inclusive community, offering to compile a contact list of fans' addresses so that "serious political punks" could "get together and start

talking.” Besides the opposition to the dominant political culture evident in Rock Against Reagan concerts and “I hate Ronnie” contests, post-punks also defined their politics in contrast to previous generations. Letters from fans cite examples of 1960s radicals who have renounced their politics and “traded in their lovebeads for three-piece suits.”⁴⁵ Young post-punk fans consistently differentiated themselves from 1960s youth, rejecting the earlier era’s wide-eyed idealism for a more skeptical and even cynical outlook. This sensibility coincided with a more pragmatic engagement with politics that rejected utopian solutions in favor of an issue-by-issue approach tempered with realism about what could be achieved amid the more conservative landscape. In the summer of 1991 the first Lollapalooza tour helped solidify the post-punk community’s self-image.

The Lollapalooza festival was the brainchild of Perry Farrell, the lead singer of Jane’s Addiction. Farrell and his associates in music management organized a lineup of seven bands representing a range of musical styles, from Jane’s Addiction to the Henry Rollins Band and Ice T and Body Count, and announced a tour to seventeen U.S. locations. The initial Lollapalooza proved successful, drawing large crowds for a ten-hour show of varied musical fare, with leading post-punk bands represented prominently. The festival featured information display tables sponsored by various political and social action groups. Many of the tables emphasized non-radical initiatives—from voter registration to abortion rights to condom distribution—suggesting that by the early 1990s the post-punk community grasped the utility of participating in electoral politics to pursue modest reforms and the necessity of battling the tide of socially conservative activism moving in the opposite direction. Still, with Greenpeace, Refuse and Resist, NARAL, and gun control advocates setting up shop, the festival’s atmosphere was decidedly left leaning. Farrell had invited representatives from the center and right of the political spectrum, notably the National Rifle Association and the armed forces, but—despite his protestations that it would have been too easy to have “this hip, left-wing event” and his claim “I don’t want to make out I have the answers, all I want to do is pose the questions”—tellingly, they declined to show. “Why should I bother getting into a pissing match with a bunch of left-wing rock & roll punks?” the army’s spokesman mused. If Lollapalooza’s politics weren’t exactly a call to storm the barricades, the festival’s success pro-

moted generational cohesion and political common ground. Even the mainstream press appreciated this heightened sense of community, epitomized by *Newsweek*'s dubbing Lollapalooza "A Woodstock for Post-Punks."⁴⁶

The breakthrough of Nirvana and post-punk in 1991 represented the serendipitous convergence of increasing major label attention, the cohesion of post-punk fans through festivals such as Lollapalooza and the International Pop Underground Convention, and a shared oppositional identity forged over a decade-long period of ferment underground, in bars, clubs, and dives far from the cultural spotlight. Politics, though only one of several ingredients in this identity, were nevertheless vital. The rock writer Jon Garelick compared Nirvana's *Nevermind* to Jon Landau's memorable comments on Bob Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* album in a 1967 review. Landau argued that although Dylan didn't mention the Vietnam War explicitly, a "profound awareness" of the war and its consequences for American life could be felt throughout the album. Garelick contended that *Nevermind* exhibited a similar consciousness about the 1991 Persian Gulf War, during which Nirvana recorded the album. Garelick suggested that Nirvana's rage on *Nevermind*, which helped it tap into powerful and inchoate generational emotions, registered an implicit rebellion in the national dialogue. One Nirvana enthusiast wrote, "When I heard that *Nevermind*, an album whose first line is 'Load up on drugs and bring your friends,' had gone to number one the first week of 1992, my first thought was, 'Bush will not be reelected.'"⁴⁷ Though the fan got the lyric wrong—it was "guns" rather than "drugs" that Cobain had mumbled—her premonition proved correct, as the greatest number of young people to turn out for a presidential election since 1972 voted George Bush out of office.

The success of post-punk, or "alternative" music, as the recording industry came to call it, combined with Bill Clinton's election shifted the cultural context in which the music operated. Articles with titles like "Alternative to What?" pointed out that this supposedly rebellious music was easily retrofitted to sell Subarus and Miller beer. Writers in the mainstream music press questioned the authenticity of some of the most popular alternative acts, such as the Stone Temple Pilots and Blind Melon, suggesting that they were second-rate examples of the industry's rush to capitalize on the popular musical style du jour. The industry's mobilization of a musical movement that it regarded only a

few years earlier as lacking commercial potential illustrated consumer capitalism's capacity for overcoming barriers to commerce—even ones as laden with dissonant noise as post-punk. Yet its staying power, as demonstrated by the long-standing recording careers it launched and its ubiquitous airplay on classic rock radio formats, testifies to post-punk's substance and enduring appeal to those longing for music that expresses an authentic spirit of resistance.

FIGHTING THE POWER

The Response of African American Politics and Culture

In his 1982 State of the Union address, contemplating an unprecedented \$100 billion deficit and looking to stave off the recession that plagued his early administration, Ronald Reagan focused the nation's attention on entitlement programs. He depicted a welfare system rife with waste and fraud, remarking, "Virtually every American who shops in a local supermarket is aware of the daily abuses that take place in the food stamp program." Even members of his own party bemoaned the president's approach. The GOP senator Bob Packwood griped, "We've got a \$120 billion deficit coming and the President says, '... a young man went into a grocery store and he had an orange in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other, he paid for the orange with food stamps and he took the change and paid for the vodka. That's what's wrong.'" Reagan's own aide deflated the anecdote's veracity, noting to a House subcommittee that change from food stamp transactions was limited to 99 cents and thus, "it is not possible to buy a bottle of vodka with 99 cents." Yet the story reveals the lack of empathy and factual accuracy that typified public discussion of welfare and poverty in the 1980s, from the highest ranks of government to the general public.¹

The tale also demonstrates the increasingly confident moralism with which Americans judged between the truly needy, whose interests the president pledged to protect, and an undeserving underclass whose existence was "discovered" by journalists and social scientists throughout the decade. Popular media and academics alike argued